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RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 0483
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NOUAKCHOTT 000083

SIPDIS

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TAGS: ECON ETRD KDEM MR PGOV PREL PTER

SUBJECT: MAYOR OF NEMA FIGHTS ON WHILE PRO-COUP PARTISANS
TRY TO OUST HIM

REF: A. 08 NOUAKCHOTT 693

1B. 08 NOUAKCHOTT 595

1C. 08 NOUAKCHOTT 186

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Cornelius C. Walsh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: The mayor of the remote southeastern town of Nema continues to try to improve the living conditions of his residents, despite ongoing attempts by pro-coup politicians to unseat him from his post. The economic situation remains as precarious as ever, exacerbated by the pullout of foreign organizations after the coup. Although reluctant to acknowledge the presence of smuggling or extremism in his community, he is well aware of the economic and administrative problems that his community faces. End summary.

12. (C) PolAsst accompanied a DOD team on a visit to southeastern Mauritania January 14 to 17. The team stayed overnight in Kiffa January 14, then passed through Tintane, Ayoun El-Atrous, and Timbedra before reaching Nema on January 15. PolAsst met the mayor of Nema, Vadily Ould Ahmed, at his residence. Note: Just before reaching Nema, the team encountered a Mauritanian military convoy headed west to resupply the GLATR III (counter-terrorism unit) deployed in Tichit. The presence of a fuel truck in the convoy indicates that the GLATR unit is perhaps actively patrolling the region around Tichit (thus expending fuel and requiring resupply). End note.

13. (C) Economic situation: Ahmed stated that Nema's economy is based almost exclusively on agriculture and animal husbandry. Consequently, the population is at the mercy of the weather -- a plentiful rainy season means a decent harvest and healthier animals, whereas a meager rainy season leads to an even more precarious economic situation. (Note: The rainy season in 2008 was better than normal. End note.) Additionally, many families live on the income of only one person, further increasing their economic vulnerability. Ahmed further stated that since the coup, unemployment in the town has increased because development projects and funding that were ongoing (or about to come online) with international partners have ceased. Comment: Informal observations and discussions along the so-called "Road of Hope" from Nouakchott to Nema confirmed Ahmed's bleak economic assessments. Hotel clerks in Kiffa and Nema stated that business was "very bad" as of late with very few guests

(EmbOffs were the only hotel guests in Nema, and in Kiffa, the only other guests were a two-man ICRC team passing through after a brief trip to the prison at Nema). Hotel clerks cited a one-two punch as the cause of this steep decline in business: First, the attack on French tourists outside Aleg in December 2007 caused an immediate sharp decline in the number of travelers driving overland from Mauritania to Mali (previously a popular tourist route, particularly with the French). Second, the August 2008 coup led to aid and development groups pulling out of the region, cutting off another major source of clientele. End comment.

¶4. (C) Cross-border trade with Mali: With the Malian-Mauritanian border closures of November 2008 in mind (Ref A), PolAsst asked about relations with Mali. Ahmed stated that Nema is much closer to Mali, both geographically and economically, than to Nouakchott. "We are one family," he said. Consequently, any border disputes or closures adversely affect the community. The amount of trade with Mali is much greater than that with Nouakchott. Ahmed stated that they import from Mali primarily vegetables (corn, etc.), coffee, spices, and salt, whereas the Malians come up to Mauritania to buy sugar, cigarettes, and tea. Asked about smuggling, Ahmed stated "it's not a problem here in Nema," though he acknowledged 1kg of cocaine was seized previously in Timbedra (approximately 100km to the west). When pressed, Ahmed admitted to hearing rumors of smuggling, but not actually witnessing it personally. Comment: Ahmed's reluctance to admit to smuggling in his own community follows a behavioral pattern of mayors in the east shifting the smuggling blame on to other communities. For example, MIST

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members observed during a visit in 2008 to the mayor of Oualata that he said smuggling was in Nema and Bassikounou. The mayor of Bassikounou in the past has pinned smuggling on Nema. With the mayor of Nema likewise pushing responsibility onto Timbedra, it is almost certain that smuggling is in fact present in all the eastern communities, but no one wants to admit to it taking place in their own backyard. End comment.

¶5. (C) Political situation: Turning to politics, Ahmed shed some light on the attempts by pro-coup politicians to oust him from his seat. For the 2007 municipal elections, Ahmed had to form alliances with several parties, whereby he became the "consensus candidate" and managed to win the mayor's seat. However, some people on the 19-member town council were unhappy with the arrangement and made half-hearted attempts to remove him from office (even before the coup). After the coup, Ahmed's anti-coup stance and membership in the anti-coup APP party (and by extension, the FNDD) provided a renewed catalyst for his enemies to force him out. Since the coup, the town council has held two separate votes to dismiss him, with his opponents confident each time they had the necessary majority. However, both votes failed. Ahmed was vague about his future chances for remaining in power, saying "as long as I have a majority in these votes of confidence, I'll be okay." Asked about the general political sentiment among the population, Ahmed said the populace is mostly against the coup, but they often invoke the saying, "Never oppose the person in power." Consequently, visible displays of anti-coup sentiment are rare.

¶6. (C) Finance committee: Ahmed stated that he based his mayoral campaign on transparency. Translating this into tangible results, after his election as mayor he established a three-member finance committee that oversees all of the municipal funds. This allows his constituents to see exactly how much money goes to whom. When asked whether he thinks this innovative practice will endure after he leaves office, he flatly stated "I don't know," observing that people have different management styles, and will often do their own thing as soon as they are in power. Nevertheless, EmbOffs praised Ahmed for his initiative and willingness to bring new governance practices to his town.

¶ 7. (C) Extremism and Al Qaida: As for extremism and recruitment by terrorist groups among the youth, Ahmed saw no reason to worry about it in Nema. "Family ties are very strong here," he said. He asserted that recruitment and radicalization were much more likely in Nouakchott, where many youth from Nema go to find employment or to continue their education beyond the secondary level. Once in Nouakchott, youth no longer have the benefit of strong familial ties to act as a buffer against outside influences.

¶ 8. (C) The challenges: Ahmed was the most animated when he was asked about the challenges he faced as mayor. He said decentralization was desperately needed, particularly for outlying towns like his own that depend more on other regions (such as Mali) than on the central government in Nouakchott for their well-being. "The government wants us to do all kinds of things, but then doesn't give us the means to do them. Either we're in charge of our own affairs, or we're not," he said. As for the greatest challenge at the level of the people, he stated water was the number one concern, matching previous findings by other visits to the region (Ref C). "Everything depends on water... If there is water, there is agriculture. If there is agriculture, that promotes more development, and so on," he said.

¶ 9. (C) Offer of support: PolAsst asked Ahmed if there were a small project (\$20,000-\$25,000) he had in mind that the Embassy (CMSE team) could do in Nema as part of USG efforts to provide tangible support to mayors who have taken public anti-coup stands (Ref B). Noting again that "water is our biggest problem" but realizing such a project fell outside the scope of the proposal, Ahmed suggested a hygiene/sanitation project (in the hospital, street cleanup, etc.). Contact details were exchanged with the promise of further coordination.

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¶ 10. (C) Comment: Ahmed stated several times throughout the meeting, "We work for the good of the population," and he seems to actually mean it. His innovative finance committee and attempts to establish transparency in governance are a rarity in Mauritanian civil administration. In contrast to many other political leaders' lavish residences in Mauritania, Ahmed has clearly not profited personally from his position, living in a very modest house with his extended family. He appears to genuinely want to help his people and develop the community, while simultaneously dealing with continued efforts by parts of the town council to force him out. End comment.

¶ 11. (C) While literally "at the end of the highway" from Nouakchott, Nema figures prominently in Mission planning. Prior to the coup, Nema was designated as a priority town for USAID anti-radicalization programming and the location for an MCC Threshold program focused on education. We have done multiple military training exercises in Nema with the Mauritanian Camel Corps. Despite the cut in programs driven by the coup, Nema remains important. AQIM elements are frequently active in the area and Nema will serve as a stand-by refueling station for the regionally-based CREEKSAND reconnaissance aircraft. Having one of the highest percentages of Black Moors, Nema and environs are seen as having a significant incidence of slavery and slave-like relationships. The region is also tied into the movement of drugs and other contraband and has connections to Malian Tuareg rebels.

WALSH